

Love, Lies & Redemption
(Sample chapter)

By Kelli A. Wilkins

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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ROMANCES BY KELLI A. WILKINS

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* *A Deceptive Match* and *A Secret Match* are related titles with shared characters. However, each novel can be read separately.

** These titles make up the *Royal Desires* series. Although connected, each book stands alone as an individual read.

* * * These novellas complete the *Naughty Nobles* trilogy. It is recommended that they are read in sequence.

Visit Kelli's website: www.KelliWilkins.com for additional titles as they become available.

CHAPTER ONE

Nebraska, 1877

Sam wiped sweat off his brow with the back of his hand and forced himself to take another step. He grimaced as a white-hot pain shot up his right thigh. *Keep moving.* He had to keep moving. If he stopped, he'd die.

He sucked dusty air in through his clenched teeth and pressed on. One foot in front of the other. *Left, right, wince. Repeat.* After he'd hobbled a few more steps, his vision blurred, and the narrow wagon trail went fuzzy. *Shit. That wasn't good.* The last time that happened, he woke face down on the prairie, half-fried in the sun. If he fell again, he'd never get up.

He shook his head to clear it and limped toward salvation. Just after sunrise, he had cleared the top of a hill and spotted a town in the distance. The wood buildings stood out like lighthouse beacons. How much farther was it? Five hundred yards? A thousand? It didn't matter. He'd get there if he had to crawl. The town would have a doc to dig the bullets out of him—and water.

Water. He swallowed and felt an all-too-familiar burn in the back of his throat. His mouth was bone-dry and tasted like dirt. How long had it been since he'd had water? A day? Two? Hell, how long had it been since he was shot and left for dead?

He had stumbled across the Nebraska prairie for days, praying alternately for rescue or death. If God didn't hate him, he would have come across a homestead, seen a rancher, or met someone on horseback—but he was alone. From time to time, he'd wondered if maybe he was *already* dead and cursed to wander like this for eternity.

But dead people didn't feel pain. And yet, by all rights, he was *supposed* to be dead. The bastards who shot him had stripped him of the essentials: his horse, his canteen, and his guns. They had taken everything he needed to survive—but they didn't get his satchel.

Something warm and wet trickled down his back in tiny rivulets. Was it sweat? Blood? He wasn't sure anymore. He ignored it and clutched the leather satchel tighter in his right hand. Wouldn't he be a sight for whoever found him when he got to town? Filthy, smelly, and covered in blood, he probably looked more dead than alive. If the doc—

His right leg buckled under him, and he sprawled to the ground. He lay in the grass, too weak to move. The wind blew dirt in his eyes as flies buzzed around his face. He tried to raise his left arm to shoo them away, but the pain was too much to

bear. A bullet had ripped into his shoulder and probably was stuck in his back.

He closed his eyes. Why fight? It would be easier to stay here and die. By noon, buzzards would start swirling overhead, ready to pick at his bloodied flesh. Someone from town might wander out to see what the vultures were after, but it wasn't likely. It wouldn't take long to—

A banging noise interrupted his thoughts. He raised his head in the direction of the sound. Town. Someone was nearby. He had to call for help. *Move. Get up and move. Now!*

He gathered what little strength he had left and pushed himself to his knees. A flash of pain cut across his ribs as he rose to his feet and turned toward town. A woman was sweeping the porch in front of a brown building. Thank God. Someone could help him.

He called out, but his feeble croak was lost in the wind.

His heart sank as he realized she was too far away to hear him. The woman reminded him of an angel in her white dress with her long, blonde hair flowing loose around her shoulders. Surely that was a good sign. Maybe God had forgiven him and sent an angel to rescue him. Nah. That'd be ridiculous. God hated him.

He focused on the building and took a step. "Keep going. Only a little more," he whispered.

* * *

Cassie dusted off a can of apricots and restacked it on the shelf. “Why do I even bother?” she muttered as she picked up the next can.

Another week had come and gone, but her days were always the same. Get up at dawn, sweep out the store, dust off the cans, and . . . wait. Her few customers strolled in on Saturday and Sunday afternoons to buy odds and ends, but nearly everyone bought their bulk goods at the general store in Baxter. Townsfolk came here only when they wanted something quick—or on credit.

The bell above the door jangled, but she didn’t bother to turn around. “That you, Luke? You’re up early. I bet you haven’t seen this side of ten o’clock in—” She glanced over her shoulder and shrieked. The can of apricots slipped from her hand and rolled across the floor.

A stranger covered in blood leaned against the doorjamb.

She raced to his side. “Who are you? What happened?”

The man locked his blue eyes onto hers. “Help me.” He held a battered leather satchel out to her. “Hide this,” he said, then collapsed forward.

Cassie caught him around the waist and eased him to the plank floor. Was he dead? She felt the side of his sweaty neck. His heart was beating, but he looked like hell. His clothes were

coated in blood and dirt, and his face had a sickly white hue to it. He was lucky to be alive. Someone had shot him full of holes.

She patted his bearded face, and he moaned. “Talk to me. Who are you?”

Where had he come from? Holloway was in the middle of nowhere. There was no railroad connection, and the town wasn’t on the stagecoach line. She hadn’t heard a horse out front, and he couldn’t have walked here from Baxter, could he? That would be suicide.

Wild ideas raced through her mind as she stared down at him. Maybe he was an outlaw or a bank robber. Decent people didn’t get themselves shot for no reason. Whoever shot him could’ve been following him, looking to finish him off.

Her gaze settled on the satchel. What was in it? Money? Gold? The deed to a silver mine? Why did he want her to hide it?

She brushed her hair away from her face and frowned. What the hell was she supposed to do with him? Why had he wandered into her store, of all places? The last thing she needed was a half-dead stranger complicating her life. His being here would only stir up trouble—and she already had more than she needed.

With a start, she realized he hadn’t moved. She shook his bloodied left shoulder. “Hey, wake up. Don’t you dare die in my store.”

The man remained motionless.

“Damn it to hell.” She yanked the satchel from his grip, then ran behind the counter and stuffed it in the bottom drawer. There wasn’t time to look inside and see what the stranger was hiding. Whoever he was, he needed help—fast.

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